

Empowerment Through Partnerships: Achieving Retention in Cultures of Student Achievement

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It's with some anxiety that I approach the podium this afternoon. I realize I'm the only person literally standing between you and the reception that has now been moved inside.

I'll make it possible for you to get there, but not before I do what I was asked to do. I am going to eventually address the topic of retention, as asked, but I want to put myself and this topic into some kind of appropriate context. And I also want to attempt to address the several interrelated themes of empowerment through partnerships, and then make a segue between that and the challenge of increasing student persistence. Finally, I'd like to make some comments on what I'm referring to as the "cultures of student achievement," and the "cultures of student success," because I know you are all here to strengthen the development of an intentional culture to support students' success.

It's an honor for me to be here. I have learned a great deal from my colleagues in the country who do the kind of work that you do. I'm especially indebted to my colleagues at NTID and Gallaudet. My relationship with NTID goes back to the late 1970s, and my relationship with colleagues at Gallaudet in the decade of the '90s. I think they have something in common with many of you, and that is we already know a great deal of what we need to do to increase student success and persistence. Now we just need to get on and do it and to get better and better and better at what we already know in our minds and our hearts must be done for America's first-year students.

I come to you in one respect as an ambassador from a small organization at the 35th oldest college and university in the United States, the original USC. We were chartered in 1801. We admitted our first students in 1805. And nearly 185 years later, we founded something called the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience and Students in Transition. One of the things we do is disseminate information that can be used by educators, such as yourselves, to increase the success of college students. Several years ago, we published a monograph entitled Hidden Abilities: New College Students with Disabilities.

I would like to share with all of you that I am a former first-year student, just as all of you are. And when I was a first-year student, it is an understatement to say that my abilities were hidden. I believe that all entering college students enter with hidden abilities. It took a great deal of time for mine to become more apparent. They were not apparent by midterm in the first semester, when my grades were three F's, two D's, and one A. They went up slightly by the end of the semester, but not enough to keep me off academic probation.

One of my most powerful motivators today is to work with people like you to prevent college students from having the kind of "freshman year experience" that I had. But I was apparently a student with hidden abilities. Some 33 years after graduation from college, I am a trustee at the *alma mater* where I earned those stellar grades my first semester in college. Now that either says something about the low standards of Marietta College, or the progress I made at some point after the first-year experience.

I learned back in the Nixon era that one of the things a leader should attempt to do in order to increase credibility was to practice some self disclosure. So what I'd like to do is to disclose a bit more about my own first-year experience, to relate this to the context of my work with your students and mine.

I was a student that I would now describe as multiply disadvantaged: a 17-year-old, rather immature, young man. I had four strikes against me. The first was I was all but paralyzed by home sickness. Secondly, I was acutely depressed. But we had no professional counselor to diagnose me or treat me. And this went ignored, essentially, for about four months. Thirdly, I was what on many campuses today we call euphemistically, and not in a complimentary perspective at all, an “undecided student,” implying that I hadn’t yet done something with all of my wisdom at age 17 that I should have done; namely, decide what I want to do with the rest of my life when I grew up.

I want to confess at age 54, I’m still undecided. And one of the things that I’m grateful for is they never forced me to choose a major. They had a true liberal arts degree where you didn’t major and I’m a product of that kind of intellectual nurturing.

I had a fourth strike that I wasn’t aware of until four years ago, and that was I had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and still do. And I didn’t know that until we finally got my high school senior son in an evaluation process four years ago. And then followed one of the true moments of transforming insight in my adult life: I sat down with a pediatrician and my son, and my most recent former wife, and the expert amongst us shared his judgments based on the evaluations that all three of us in the nuclear family had completed, that my son was just like his father. And suddenly I had an explanation that I had never had before: we both had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. That explained much of the way I had lived my life and certainly gave me adequate insight, finally, into one of the major reasons why I had such great difficulty in the first year of college.

I know now that approximately 25 percent of entering college students can be described exactly as I have just described myself. And that does not include some of the additional challenges of all of the students that you work with. At least in my own case, though, I think this gives me some basis of empathy for working with some students whose abilities, upon matriculation at least, are still quite hidden.

I come here today with a great deal of respect for the organizers of this meeting, and for their incorporation into their theme a basic idea that is obviously central to your work. And I want to address these two sub-themes: the theme of empowerment and the theme of partnerships. I’d also like to put this in the context of a very important change we made in my own center, which I’m beginning to announce publicly, and which I want to do so this afternoon.

I mentioned earlier that my center was founded 12 years ago. It was an outgrowth of a series of convenings at national and international gatherings to bring higher educators together. We had been calling our center the *National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience*. About six weeks ago, I obtained authorization from the university administration to whom I report to change the name of our center from the *National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience* to the *National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*. And we did this for many reasons. But most importantly to not only reflect, mirror, but also to encourage a continual process of rethinking about the relationship between language and the respect that we want to convey for all new students, particularly for what we all have in common, rather than what might differentiate us.

In the beginning year, all students are, of course, first-year students. They all certainly were not freshmen in light of the fact now that 55 percent of entering college students are women. I think this is more than a semantic distinction. This is reinforced when I note the kind of demographics that represents the participants in this conference today – the gender ratio represented herein. So I did want to report that to you.

The theme of empowerment, I think, is one that is inextricable from increasing student persistence. It relates, as I see it anyway, to several of the challenges of increasing the probability that students will return for a second, third, fourth, fifth, or however many year plan they are on. It has to do with moving new students from dependence to independence. It has to do, therefore, with reducing, I believe, especially their dependence on those whom we perceive

to be primarily responsible for their learning; namely, people like me. It has to do with transforming the relationship between faculty and students.

And I think in order to do this, to truly empower students, we must bring more faculty like me into this national conversation to increase student persistence. One of the things we are definitely going to have to do is to take even more steps to modify what remains the dominant pedagogy in the first-year college classroom, which is the pedagogy that I'm using now. And I'm using it now only because I don't have the opportunity to be with you 28 times consecutively for 75 minutes. I am using a medieval method of communication with Star Wars technology and very talented assistance from people who have not hidden, but obvious, abilities that I do not possess.

This process of communication was developed around the year 1100, shortly after the founding of the University of Paris, when the culture that was being transmitted to European university students was entirely an oral culture; there were basically no books. Or if there were, they were written by hand and they were in a few, very rare libraries. And the only way you got a book of your own was by listening to someone else, always a man, talk. And you listened quietly, did not speak, and wrote as he spoke.

Now this method of communicating information was very adaptive. It made sense. It was appropriate until Gutenberg invented movable type, about 350 years later. And that of course made possible the modern printing process. One of the things that strikes me about our pedagogy in colleges and universities, in spite of the advent of the printing press, is that we have not changed that method very much on many of our campuses. And it is not a pedagogy that empowers first-year college students, because it prolongs their dependency on what they perceive to be the single sole source of information and knowledge, namely, someone external to themselves.

The lecture method remained dominant not only after the invention of movable type, but after the invention of the telephone, telegraph, teletype, television, and now, of course, the computer. I believe this is an example of something I am fond of describing as "Waiting for Napoleon." And I would like to elaborate on this metaphor and suggest that you go back and look at your own first-year college experience on your campus for all the students on your campus, and especially for your students. Because I suspect that even in your profession there are some elements of "Waiting for Napoleon." But the example I'm referencing this to in this case is the dominant pedagogy that keeps students dependent. As long as they are dependent, they are less likely to persist and be successful.

What do I mean by that? I refer to a practice that was established by the British government in the year 1803, when the British were at war with Napoleon and anticipating an invasion on the order of a Spanish Armada, which preceded Napoleon in 1588. The British created a job for a man to stand on the cliffs of Dover and to look out across at the lovely and frequently not-so-lovely English Channel and watch and wait for the Armada. And when he was to have seen it, he was to have rung a loud bell stationed next to him and set in motion a relay of other bell ringers, to prepare his countrymen and women for the pending invasion.

Well, Napoleon never invaded Britain. He was diverted to Egypt, ultimately Russia, back to Europe, and ultimately twice defeated, twice exiled, dying a horrible death in 1821. The question then remains, what happened to the position of bell ringer, this parliamentary financed slot on the banks of the English Channel?

That remained as an honorary position for which no duties were performed until May of 1945, 124 years after the death of Napoleon. It was five years after the invention of radar for military purposes. I believe that one of the basic causes of the level of attrition that we face right now is "Waiting for Napoleon." The fact that we continue to organize and execute the first-year college experience using a culture, a dominant set of values, beliefs, and pedagogies that were developed prior to the admission of significant numbers of college students, such as you and I have the privilege of teaching, advising, and counseling. In effect, then, I'm saying that many of the assumptions, policies, and procedures

that undergird the first-year experience no longer make sense. They are clearly not adaptive to the realities of the students that we face.

I think this notion of empowerment has everything to do with urging new students to begin thinking about a concept that my colleagues in psychology describe as “locus of control.” One of the goals of our first-year seminar course at the University of South Carolina is to get students to think, to realize, and to act upon this critical insight that we make them do very little. There is the misconception that they are not being unsuccessful because it is their professors’ fault or responsibility, or the fault or responsibility of their roommate, or the fault or responsibility of their parents, et cetera, et cetera. This critical insight is, rather, in some significant part, not entirely, due to the decisions that they make, that they are responsible.

One of the central concepts then in increasing student persistence from the first to second year has to do with working with new college students to strengthen their locus of control. We need to see that they are more consciously able to make decisions as people who act, who are actors on life’s stage, rather than people who are acted upon. This is a central concept in the maturation process of first-year students that leads to increased persistence.

Another traditional component of this empowerment theme of your conference, vis-à-vis the first year, I believe, is that we have allowed students for too long to believe that they ultimately have to be dependent on someone outside of themselves, usually the lecturing professor, to get the information that they need to be successful in college.

One of the major themes in first-year retention programs is something called the First-year Seminar, Freshman Seminar, College 101, University 101, College Success, or Student Success; there are a hundred or more titles for this kind of course genre. This is a type of course that dates to 1882 in American higher education. It is a type of course that is now found on 72 percent of the undergraduate accredited colleges and universities in the United States, including the two foremost postsecondary institutions in the country that have the education of students who are deaf as a special mission.

One of the main themes of that, ladies and gentlemen, is to correct a structural flaw in the first year of college. We need to teach students very early in the first term of college how they, not somebody else, can go out and collect the information they need and then do two more things with that information. I refer to this as a kind of holy trinity of information retrieval. This is really a reaction against a practice that developed in the late 19th century, when the two semester sequence of rhetoric courses was developed. It reinforced the notion that in two semesters of writing, thinking, and sometimes speaking, but especially writing, you could wait until the second term of the college experience before introducing students to information as it historically was organized and categorized, namely in libraries. This is a classic example of “Waiting for Napoleon” in the academic setting.

The practice on most American colleges and universities has been to introduce students in the first year to the college library in the second term. I don’t believe that makes good sense in terms of the goal of supporting student persistence. We know now that to be a successful student, one of the most important skills you have to have is knowing where to find information and knowing what to do with it when you find it. And the library, now integrated with technology, is the most logical place to engage in that kind of learning. This insight is transforming the nature of the first-year experience role of faculty librarians, and the role of first-year seminars as a retention tool to teach students how to be successful. So on many campuses then we have eliminated “Waiting for Napoleon.” We are saying we are not going to wait any longer for the second semester or spring quarter to introduce students to the library.

Why do we wait that long? We waited that long for two reasons. One, find a quiet place to study if you happen to live in a residence hall that used to be called a dormitory that some people think is a zoo. That is one reason. The other reason historically has been that you would only send a self-respecting first-year student into a library,

because he or she has to write a term paper. And that has historically been done in the second term of college. Why would you want to send somebody into a library earlier than that?

Well, because you want to increase the chance of student success and persistence. You want to make this one of the first agendas for new students learning how to do things with information. First of all, where is it? Who has it? What has it? How do I find it? One of the first agendas for new students is learning how to collect information.

Secondly, when you get the information, you need to teach students how to evaluate it. Does it meet some critical need or test? Can they use it? Can they solve a problem with it? Can they create something with it? Can they receive enjoyment, satisfaction, and pleasure from this information? That's the second step, evaluation.

And the third step is asking students to do something with it. To make, sing, dance, play, act, write, speak, or do something with information. That of course is part of the larger context of active learning. One of the things we have come to learn then is that first-year students who are actively engaged rather than passively engaged in learning are more likely to persist for a second year, third year, and fourth year, as undergraduates. But all this has to do with empowering students, making them less dependent, more active, more in control, more connected, et cetera.

Now, this theme of partnership that is so central to this meeting and to the national PEPNet organization is one that I also believe is central to increasing student persistence. The campuses that I visit in our country or the campuses I hear about, read about, meet educators from, that seem to be making the greatest headway in increasing the probability of student persistence are those that have a partnership. I can rarely say anything, as you haven't already discovered, in one word. But this is a great word, a critical word to understanding how to increase student persistence.

I believe you are more likely to increase student persistence in the first year if you have an effective working partnership between at least four groups. And the first group is the faculty. We faculty have about a thousand years of promoting or impeding anything we like or dislike. Okay? We have to be on board. We are not going to change anything. The administrators, they come and they go. But people like me, I've been in one place 30, going on 32 years. I could never get another job and I've had presidents and provosts come and go. You have to get people like me involved.

The second group is the academic administrators. Critical. They set priorities and allocate resources; their participation is absolutely vital.

Thirdly, the student personnel profession is a critical and often neglected or underutilized partner in student success.

And the fourth group is the students themselves, particularly the most outstanding students, the student leaders, those people who truly are the conscience on your campus for what students need and deserve. I believe effective retention programs involve all four of those groups in appropriate representation.

And that is, of course, very much in keeping with the spirit of this conference. Now, how does this all relate more specifically to what we have learned about increasing student persistence? I guess maybe in retrospect, it was a good thing that I acquired, I assume genetically, this thing that is now called attention deficit disorder. It's enabled me to be a very effective one-issue guy. As I've learned more and more, I've gotten narrower and narrower on one subject anyway, until very recently.

That reminds me of a wonderful observation that you might have to try with one of your students at some point. I read a description of a counseling session about studying one subject. It was a counseling session between a famous basketball coach, Shelby Metcalf from Texas A&M, who was having a "come-to-Jesus meeting," as they say in South Carolina, with one of his star players who had grades very similar to mine. And his grades that semester were four F's and one D. And the coach's observation to this student was: "Son, it looks to me like you spent a bit too much time studying one subject."

Well, I've spent probably a little bit too much time studying one subject. So I decided a few years ago to change that. I had a remarkable epiphany on the way to some forum, and I realized many educators that I've worked with for years had an interest not only in arriving students, but had an interest in departing students. What do we do with students when they arrive? And what do we do with them when they depart? And how is the success of students when they arrive connected to what you want them to be like when they leave?

And to make a long story short, as a not totally ADD person, I developed a second interest in recent years, other than my son, and that is the senior-year transition. And I think that teaches us a great deal about what entering college students need. And I'm going to try to integrate some of those learnings and findings into my observations about success in the first year.

Basically, then, there are two critical transitions in college. The one in, and the one out. And what you know about where you want the student to be as he or she leaves, should have a significant influence on what you provide for him or her when they arrive. So what have we learned in 30 years after good solid research and practice in American higher education, about increasing student retention? Well, we have learned that it's a very, very difficult challenge. We have also learned that, in spite of all of best interests and efforts, to the extent that we have good data on this at all, retention is still declining nationally. We know that were it not for the efforts that we have underway, that the situation would be even worse. We know that of the students who returned in the fall of 1997, and who had entered in the fall of 1996, we had the lowest retention rate in a decade.

In baccalaureate level institutions, we lost 26.3 percent of them from fall 1996 to fall 1997. That is, we lost them to the institution at which they matriculated. Some of them may have gone elsewhere. Again we don't have a national data collection process on this, so we are not really sure. One thing we do know, though, is that retention and attrition correlates with certain other broad socioeconomic patterns and trends. We found out in the recessions of 1973, 1974, 1981-82, and 1990-92, that college enrollment and retention actually increased, because college participation became an alternative to conventional remunerative employment.

We know that in the roaring economy of the late 1990s, for many students, a preferable alternative is not to persist in college, but to enter the economy immediately for the long-term or for some more finite duration until they return to college.

We also know that public policy, particularly how we go about supporting college participation through financial aid, has a big influence on student persistence. We know that, as we have shifted the welfare in this country away from the poor and college students, and increasingly to bankers and defense contractors and stock brokers, many students will defer college or stop out rather than take on these ever-mounting levels of debt. There is no question that this critical issue of public policy relates to attrition. There are many other socioeconomic factors as well, which I'll add occasionally in these remarks.

What do we know that you can do to increase persistence from the first to second year? Make this a kind of laundry list. You could compare my list, I know, with what they are doing at NTID and Gallaudet. They have a virtually identical list, not because I gave it to them but because they have access to the same sources now in an extensive well-published literature that I have. And they interact with the same educators that I interact with, who have been learning from these kinds of experiences that these are the things that you do to increase student persistence.

One thing you do is you pay more attention to the orientation process of new students. You say that it's so serious that we will require it. I don't mean an orientation course; I mean orientation itself. I find it interesting what colleges and universities require, what they say is so valuable, so important: "We are going to make all students do this thing" – whatever that thing is. And over the past 30 years, one of the most pronounced trends in American higher education has been to reduce the things that we all share a belief in as being so important that we want all students to do

it. As a matter of fact, I now know of many institutions where the only things that we all agree on as important are that students must apply; take some kind of diagnostic assessments to place them in first-year courses; and register, pay fees, and take one course in common. That one course in common is generally a first-year English requirement. Beyond that, we have no shared value system that we all cherish something sufficiently to say that all students will do it.

Frankly, I find that appalling. I find that a sad commentary on our lack of vision, our lack of judgment, and our unwillingness to look seriously at this 30-year research and accumulation of evidence about what is it that increases student persistence. If we were willing to look at it, we would make students do a number of things that we now leave as an option.

For example, we would require them to participate in orientation. The evidence is the more time you invest in orientation, the more likely you will have students around for a second year. NTID now devotes not one day, like the University of South Carolina does, but ten times that amount of time to require orientation for its new students. That is the most extensive orientation program I know of in the United States. Ten days – that’s incredible.

Based on a huge body of published literature that has been accumulating for the past 24 years, we now know that when you extend orientation in the form of credit-bearing courses (these first-year seminars), students who participate in first-year seminars are different from students who don’t participate. They are different in several respects. They come back to college for a second year in greater numbers. They graduate in greater numbers. They are more likely to seek assistance than students who don’t participate in these courses. They are more likely to join clubs, organizations, and activities. They have more relationships and interaction with faculty outside of class. They have higher levels of satisfaction.

All of those are findings that correlate with the national literature on what increases student persistence. It would seem obvious, then, that even if we weren’t willing to require all students to participate in first-year seminars, that we at least make sure that every institution in the United States, certainly every one of your institutions, offers students the opportunity, if they wish, to participate in such a course. But the basic finding here, ladies and gentlemen, is that there is a positive correlation between the time and energy, the focus, and the importance you assign to orienting students to college and increased student retention, particularly when you do that in the form of a credit-bearing course.

Another finding has been that institutions that invest additional time, energy, and resources in improving academic advising realize increased yields of first- to second-year students. And there is a logical marriage between advising and orientation. Let me illustrate that. In the most recent survey of freshman seminar directors done by our *National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience*, we found that 30 percent of the first-year seminars were incorporating academic advising. The instructor of the first-year seminar was also the academic advisor for that cohort of 15, 20, or 25 students. When “Student X” comes in for advising in early November to choose courses for spring term, the advisor who was also the instructor of that course already has learned a great deal about his or her advisee. The instructor knows about his or her writing abilities, has seen the research skills, knows how well they are attending class, and knows a great deal more than that. It seems to make eminent good sense.

This relates to still another finding, and that is, to use the words of Carl Rogers, when colleges and universities develop what he called the “significant other,” which is to structure some way of intentionally insuring that every entering college student has at least one significant employee in the institution who cares about that student’s welfare. Those students who report that they had a significant other during the first year of college are more likely to persist to the second year.

One of the most striking consistent findings of research on college dropouts is that when you ask them to reflect on their first year of college, they cannot name any employee of the college who invested in their success or who even knew their name. The idea then is to intentionally guarantee that you have for every student a “significant other.”

Both Gallaudet and NTID developed intentional programs to do what in the literature is called mentoring. A mentor is a significant other. It comes from the language of classical mythology. Mentor was Odysseus' most trusted friend with whom he left the care of his family when he went off to fight a long, great war. There is abundant evidence from a number of disciplines, particularly now championed by the women's movement in American higher education, that institutions that deliberately sponsor and mentor their new arrivals, whether those are students, faculty or staff, realize greater success in the new members of the community.

For years we have known that as a university we are the fourth largest producer of African-American baccalaureate students. We have wanted to know why. How do we accomplish that? One of the factors that has been singled out for more than two decades by our African-American students is that they believe one of the most critical elements in their success was someone they called a MAP counselor, a Minority Assistance Program counselor. These counselors developed relationships in the first year with entering African-American students.

We require all the students in the first-year seminar to have a final writing assignment, and that writing assignment is one in which they write about and describe the mentor they have selected. We tell entering college students that college is like a journey. It's Huck Finn, that great motif of growth through journey and travel, not to Orlando, but rather down the Mississippi River or through a series of trials and tribulations.

One of the end products of that first term of college should be the ability of a student to have selected one critical person that he or she respects. Take that as a charge. If you could, would it be possible to identify one person for every entering student after four months that that student respects, that they might want to emulate? And how would you do that intentionally? Could you make an office on your campus responsible for recruiting volunteers to serve as mentors, for matching them up with entering college students? If you do that, I promise you'd have more students for a second year.

Another key finding about persistence in the first year, ladies and gentlemen, all comes back to one word. And it is the word "involvement."

Now, what do I mean by involvement? Involvement is a measure of three things that, when they happen in the first year, more likely induce students to stay. The first measure of involvement is a time commitment. Literally. This means spending more time on anything that is connected to your college or university, that is sponsored by your college or university, or that is supervised by your college or university. Whether that is being in class, being in a library, being part of a group study process of some kind, working on campus, being in a sport or a team, or serving off campus in a service learning initiative, it doesn't seem to matter what it is, as long as you increase the amount of time students spend in the first year.

Now, this is an enormous challenge, because we organize our campuses to make it easy for students to leave, to get off the campus as fast as they can and to be as unconnected and uninvolved as you are willing to allow them to be. I believe we have to intentionally, through all kinds of means, increase the amount of time students literally spend on campus, because that has been found to be one of the best correlations with persistence. That's why we know that students who work on-campus have higher persistence rates than students who work off-campus. They are spending more time on campus, and they are almost always developing a relationship with someone like you or me who is not only interested in their work tasks, but also their significant relationships, and their stressors, and their strengths, et cetera.

The second piece of involvement is energy. And that is one of the principal problems with the first year. As the first year historically has been organized, it has been a context of very little energy. Students are expected to go to class; there they are asked to keep quiet, take notes, and not talk to anybody else. The class experience had nothing to do with making friends or developing relationships. And so it was no wonder, given that relationship formation is the

primary need of virtually every entering college student, including and especially your college students, when they can't do that in class, they invest – overly invest – in that out of class. That takes energy.

Most of the things we ask them to do in the traditional first-year classroom do not take energy. They are very passive. What we have learned then is that students in the first year who expend more calories, who are active, who talk, who write, who dance, who sing, who play, who debate, who argue, who create, who do anything that takes action, are more likely to persist. Do anything you can to increase the level of activity in any area for which you are responsible because those are behaviors which correlate with persistence.

Now, the final piece of this involvement trinity is time plus energy plus commitment. Students who spend more time on campus, who become more active, and who are around other people who are committed are more likely to emulate the behaviors of committed people. When you invest time in things, you are more likely to be committed to those things. It's no wonder that many first-year students don't develop commitment because we don't demand that they make the investment. There were certainly times when I was sorely tempted to, if not terminate, at least reduce my commitment to my child before he went to college. But every time I was so tempted, I'd say, "I've already invested 18 years in this guy, I can't quit now." Investing all that time and all that energy equals commitment.

How do first-year college students learn commitment? They really learn it in several ways. But the most powerful way we think they learn commitment is by being around other committed students. I believe a college or university that is serious about trying to increase retention has a process for matching, juxtaposing, putting together your most outstanding, upper-class men and women students in a direct position of influence, power, and authority over entering college students to teach, above all else, commitment.

I've learned a lot in 30 years of research about college student behavior and what context students learn the most during the college experience. I'm sorry to report this to you, because it's not entirely a compliment, but students seem to learn the most *not* from their professors and *not* in the formal classroom, but from their interactions with fellow students. For better or worse, they become like the students with whom they associate. Now, that is a very chilling conclusion, because it says if left unmanaged, or undirected, many of them are going to become like students we might not prefer that they become like.

So one of the major trends in increasing student persistence is for us to take more control over who influences whom. And the way that I've seen most intensively to do this is to have students participate in a first-year seminar course in which such a course is co-taught by outstanding undergraduate students, peer leaders. I have seen first-year seminars at hundreds of campuses add and subtract all kinds of things. Increase the credit, decrease the credit, permit student affairs officers to teach, pull them out of the course, add a required text, subtract a required text, or change this assignment or that. I've never seen a first-year seminar introduce the component of having undergraduates co-teach a course and remove that. Once they do it, they find that student evaluations and the reports of student learning increase dramatically. Whatever you do in the first year, you've got to have your most influential successful students involved in those initiatives.

Another very important finding about first-year retention, ladies and gentlemen, is the theory called academic and social integration. And basically, in lay person's terms, what this means is when you get first-year college students doing two things together, they are more likely to persist. And those two things, believe it or not, are studying together in groups, and making friends in those groups. The more friendship formation you can generate conterminously with study and doing work in groups, the more likely you are to have increased persistence.

I'm persuaded, as I heard in the session immediately before this one, that one of the reasons Gallaudet was able to increase its retention in the most recent year from the Fall '96 to '97 cohort of first-year students was that they had a number of freshmen in groups where they studied together and made friends together in what are called linked or

paired courses – the concept of learning communities. This occurred even though the Fall '96 cohort was less qualified academically than the Fall '95 cohort,

From our national research, I'm sorry to report to you that still only 10 percent of the freshmen seminars in the United States offer an integrated component of learning communities. But that number is growing. For those of you that are not yet initiated, what is a learning community? A learning community is something that we construct and have control over. And it's been found that when students are part of a learning community in the first year, they come back in higher numbers in the second year. Not only traditional-aged college students, but it has been the same finding with nontraditional adults of all ages, in community colleges, or in research universities; it doesn't matter what the institutional type is.

A learning community is where you have a small cohort of students, in the first year, co-enrolled for two or more courses. Even when the faculty of those two courses do nothing to talk to each other, integrate, or plan together, the students still are more likely to persist and earn higher grades when they are enrolled in learning communities. The findings have been universally positive about this intervention. It's called academic and social integration.

One of the challenges about the first-year curriculum is that we have to have growing support and assistance from faculty colleagues like me to create the kind of classroom environment where you have both academic and social integration.

Let me hit the word "integration." When I first came to South Carolina, it was two years after the Civil Rights Act, and I really didn't want to be there. I was a liberal Connecticut Yankee, which sounds like a contradiction in terms, but that is what I was. And I came down there. I was thinking a great deal about the lack of integration. The longer I've been in higher education, the more we have integrated South Carolina in that sense, and the more I learned about the educational concept of integration.

Integration, ladies and gentlemen, simply means that as a student, you become a member of at least one powerful primary group, a primary group where the relationships are intimate, personal, and informal; it's the opposite of a large, impersonal, secondary group. Most college classes unfortunately have the characteristics of secondary groups. We find that learning increases when you create subgroups where students learn in what social scientists call these primary groups. When students join groups in the first year, they are more likely to persist, whether they are social groups, athletic groups, or study groups. It doesn't seem to matter as long as the groups are licensed by the college or university, and they are engaging in legal functional behavior. The outcome is universal: increased persistence.

Another finding that is very striking for the organization of the first year is that first-year students who interact with professors outside of class are more likely to come back for a second year of college. I think then that all of us in our work have to teach first-year students how to do that. We have to change the culture. The culture that they come to college with, the one they learned in secondary school, was that the teacher is the enemy, that you don't "go to the office" because "go to the office" automatically implies some kind of punishment or negative sanctions. Here I am in the first-year college classroom: "Here is my syllabus. Here are the office hours. I want you to come see me." They say, "This guy must be kidding. Why do I want to seek voluntary punishment?" Then we have to normalize a behavior in seeking out adult figures, particularly in male students.

There are more women coming to college than there are men. Now there are more women coming to college who want to be doctors than there are men. Okay? Women are going to earn higher grades; they are going to be retained at a higher level. But they are going to graduate, and they are going to get lower starting salaries, and they are not yet going to be elected President. In the meantime, what about all the men that have higher attrition rates, and

poorer grades? One of the things that accounts for that is their greater unwillingness to seek assistance, and some types of men are dramatically under represented on American campuses.

The quality of the social life for my African-American female students at the University of South Carolina is not what it needs to be for a successful first-year woman. Their male cohorts are so dramatically underrepresented, in part, because these men, in many respects most men, are less willing to seek assistance, and because they haven't gone through a process that legitimizes that, let alone mandates it, in the first year of college.

That is something else we know about increased retention. When you make students engage in certain behavior in the first year, like seeking assistance, you are more likely to get greater retention. We don't tell our students in the freshman seminar at the University of South Carolina, 2500 of them this fall, "We have a wonderful career center. You ought to go use it." We are going to say, "We have a wonderful career center, and you will use it. You must use it. It's a requirement in this course. And you are going to, all of you, all 2500 of you, use it in a six-week period, and you will all take vocational aptitude testing. You will use the career library. You'll sign up for computerized interactive guidance, and you'll all write a paper. Why? Because in some cases we know what is better for you than you do." Sound paternalistic? I admit it. It's not dead at all; it's alive and well, and it's highly necessary.

What we have done in this country, ladies and gentlemen, is we have created what a colleague of mine at Duke University calls an "abandoned generation." We have given up a myriad of responsibilities. So that after five, for example, on many of our campuses, one might ask, "Who is in charge after five o'clock?" Two groups: campus police and 20-year-old resident hall assistants. There isn't an adult to be seen doing the kinds of things that adults need to be doing with young developing adults and adults of all ages, namely, eating with them, talking with them, schmoozing with them, and being available to observe as they do their work.

I have a 22-year-old college son who, with a little luck, will graduate in two weeks from college. And he spent four and a half months in Spain this fall. His first phone call to me was after he was there about a month. I was pleased and impressed that it took him that long to call. He didn't call for money the first time. He said, "I'm doing well. Learning Spanish." And I said, "Tell me more." "I'll tell you the best place to study, it's in the bars. You can really learn Spanish in the bars." And I said, "Sure, John. Tell me more."

He said, "Well, let me tell you about the bars in Spain. It's totally different from the bar scene in an American college town. In my college experience, no matter what you educators try and do for us, there is nothing that is going to have the appeal that booze does. And everything that we do is still going to revolve around alcohol because you haven't given us anything better to do. But I found something better to do in Spain. You know, in North Carolina we go to bars for two reasons. We go to bars to get drunk and to get..." You fill in the blank. He said, "We don't do that in Spain. We go to bars to talk." And he said, "We go to bars to talk with people of all ages." He said there are people in the bars from 16 to 85. "And we can stay in there as long as we want and nobody is pushing us, nobody is trying to turn the table over. I can buy a bottle of beer or coffee and nurse it all night."

What he was telling me was that for the first time in many, many years, he was not in a youth ghetto. He was connected to other adults. That is a main theme of enhancing student retention on campuses. We undertook a remarkable experiment a couple years ago. We decided to invite university professors to see how many would be willing to have one meal a week, an evening meal, with college students, if the university would pay for the meal. And we set up a reasonable goal at first. We thought, "Let's see if we can recruit 35 out of 1400 faculty that would be willing to give one night a week, one hour a week, for a meal with students." We were flooded with responses and haven't begun to accommodate them all.

Sometimes you don't know, ladies and gentlemen, what your colleagues are willing to do until you invite them. You'll be amazed at who is willing to come out of the closet. But you have to extend the invitation. A meal is the

most universal, culturally proscribed context to communicate to people that you respect them and that you accept them and that you are willing to learn from them, in spite of all differences in power, knowledge, status, or various types of abilities. It's an example then of creating a culture of success where people come together to do those kinds of things.

I started to make a point about faculty-to-student contact. That has been one of the most important findings in the retention literature. We know that students who interact with faculty outside of class are more likely to come back the next year. So then, we have to teach students in the first term how to do that. They need to read about us, learn about us, and know how to talk with us. We have an assignment that we build into the freshman seminar called "decoding professors." And they read an essay about us, and then we ask them to go out and interview a professor and come back and report on it, either orally or in writing. We teach them a set of transferable skills that they can use with other faculty because we know that that is such an important success strategy.

Another thing that we know is that colleges and universities that develop structures, and interventions to, if not force, at least encourage and facilitate students toward working in groups, are more likely to have those students come back for a second year.

I was reminded of this spring. We had a visitor to our center who is a president of a Norwegian engineering college. He spent a spring term with us. And when I asked him why he wanted to come off the beaten path in the United States, not to Orlando, but to Columbia, South Carolina, he said, "What you are doing in the freshman year is really so un-American." And I said, "What is that, Olav Soleng, President of a Nordic college of engineering?" He said, "What you are doing is asking first-year students and educators to work collaboratively, to engage in partnerships. And that is very un-American. What you Americans usually do is pit everybody against everybody else. And you teach your students that to be successful, they have to be great competitors. That is not what you're doing. I can't believe it. I had to come see this for myself and see how an alternative approach that is called empowerment and partnership produces more second-year students, as opposed to the traditional white male European model of rugged individualism and an extreme emphasis on competition."

Well, an illustration of that then is instead of asking students to spend most of their time competing with each other, that you ask them to spend more time in the first year in groups, where they support each other.

One of the most powerful interventions we found in the first year. We are just starting it, but has been around since 1976. Some of you use it with your students – the concept of supplemental instruction, which is intervention where you ask students to increase their time on tasks 50 minutes a week. They volunteer. It's a focus on, instead of high-risk students, high-risk courses. These are courses in which you have 30 percent or greater D's or F's. We don't call them "high-risk courses." Now we call them "historically challenging" courses. I love that. We are great at developing those euphemisms.

If you don't know about supplemental instruction, you need to learn about it. It's one of the key components of a first-year effective retention strategy.

Another piece of the retention mix in the first year is reduced to one word, ladies and gentlemen; it's the theme of "community." More and more colleges are realizing that if they can have students doing more things in common, they are more likely to stay in a community where we share a great deal in common. What are things in common? Well, for example, these include maybe taking a few more common courses instead of just one, participating in common rituals, ceremonies, celebrations that the campus organizes. A concept that began in the Middle Ages, was thrown out in the United States in the '60s, and '70s, when we became cool and hip and wanted to live like we were in California and have nothing in common with each other, is the concept of convocation.

Another concept or illustration of community would be the novel idea of asking all students to read something, the same something, during the same week of the term, and focusing the campus on all of us coming

together to discuss this work. Or having all the students read a book before they begin college. One of the reasons we liked my son's college, me especially, was they had a summer reading program to lay a basis for intellectual community before the students arrived. And they sent him a book to read over the summer, a book by the first African-American female he had ever been asked to read. He was 18. What was the book? The Measure of Our Success by the founder of The Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman. He had never read a woman author from his own state until that college made him do it. After he read it, he said that I needed to read it. It would be good for me. It was a common intellectual experience.

The same campus sets aside a 45-minute period once a week with no classes and all offices closed. What are people supposed to do? They are supposed to go to "College Coffee." They provide coffee for 3500 students and 200 faculty. They have created a number of occasions to bring people together, to create community. That's a key theme in enhancing student persistence.

Another key piece of retention from the first to second year, ladies and gentlemen, one that was neglected for the better part of a half century, is the residential component. I was talking to one of you this afternoon, who will remain nameless, as will the name of his or her institution. He or she indicated that he or she thought that one of the greatest challenges on the campus for students who are deaf is the nature of the residential environment. It is beyond the control and influence right now of educators like yourself, because it's that environment where the students spend so much time that is not supportive of what you are trying to do for students.

Now, consider this process of rethinking what the college residential experience is all about. What should it be called? The fact that we call housing "housing" suggests that that is all we are doing for students. And if that's all we are doing for students, it ought to be done by private developers and outsourced, because it has no clear connection to the educational mission of the institution.

There are a number of colleges, over 60 now, that are recreating a concept and argument that if you want more success for first-year students, you've got to have faculty living in the residence halls. Can you imagine that? Asking your faculty to live in residence halls? It's happening. We took them all out in World War II. We said they should be doing research. Now if you live with the students, you'd be fired. However, we know now when faculty come back and live in residence halls, it makes a statement that these are places for learning as well as socializing. All of these things, then, *are* under our control.

I'd like to ask you, in conclusion, to think about where we have come with your students and my students in a little better than three decades. In 1965, we began a great noble experiment. It's still an experiment, I think, because the whole country is no longer committed to it. I thought we were, until a few years ago, but I don't think so any longer. This experiment is something called "access." We came to the conclusion that after World War II, the GI Bill, and the Civil Rights Act, that in order to fulfill the potential of American democracy we had to provide access for every American citizen who wanted to go to college. In Republican and Democrat administrations alike, the House, the Senate, the Executive Office, we bought into it. We bought into it in 50 states. We authorized something called the Higher Education Act in 1965, and have reauthorized it during every session of Congress to make this broad-based college participation possible. The result of that is we have taken in millions of students for whom American colleges and universities were not designed.

Colleges and universities, ladies and gentlemen, were designed for just a few of us in this room. They were designed for people like me: white, male, Protestant, New England, property owning, formerly affluent students who hear reasonably well. That is who colleges were designed for. Nobody else.

We have only admitted women since 1833. We have only admitted significant numbers of women since 1965. It's no wonder then in the past 33 years that as we admitted all these students for whom we were never designed

for, that we have had high levels of failure. And as the level of failure became more and more apparent to many higher educators, unfortunately orchestrated at the highest levels of the American government, we entered a phase of what I and others call “student bashing,” “blaming the victim,” and chastising students for their lack of initial success.

Right now, the most obvious evidence of this is the backlash against not only affirmative action, but against developmental education, a threat to the American democratic system, and I’m very concerned about it. It penalizes those who are least fortunate, those who are least able to control many of the circumstances that are responsible for the condition they are in when they enter college. Well, so we are then looking at what has happened for 33 years. High levels of student failure we say, but also dramatic levels of student success. Sixty percent of people seeking college, earning baccalaureate degrees, are receiving them. That is extraordinary.

What I think, though, is most important, in the last few years is that there are a significant number of educators, myself in the lead with others – and I trust most of you here – who are saying what is important is *not* to engage in student bashing. What is important is *not* to lament the conditions, the circumstances, and the characteristics of our students over which they have no control, which may be the amount of time they spend watching television with parents who gave them television instead of books, attention, and love. In other words, reduce the amount of time we spend thinking about the characteristics of our students that we view with concern, and we view as a “problem.” And, instead, focus on what we have the greatest control over. What we have the greatest control over, ladies and gentlemen, is what we do, how we organize the first year, the so-called “structures,” and whether or not you have a significant number of these components of an effective retention program. I know a number of your institutions do. I heard one session this afternoon where the list, I’m persuaded, was essentially complete for doing everything possible to increase persistence. We have the knowledge. If you have the will, you have the ability.

Really, ladies and gentlemen, it’s not a retention problem. It’s about the first year of the college experience. If you want to improve student persistence, you’ve got to make structural changes in how you organize the new student experience. And that is under your control. It’s all under your control. It’s not a function of the quality or the characteristics of the students.